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Military Order

of the

Loyal Legion

of the

United States

COMMANDERY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

WAR PAPER 62.

The Cracker Line.

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WAR PAPERS.

62

"The Cracker Line."

PREPARED BY COMPANION

Brevet Brigadier-General

SAMUEL W. PRICE,

U. S. Volunteers,

AND

READ AT THE STATED MEETING OF MARCH 7, 1906.

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The Cracker Line,

As Was Known to the Army of the Cumberland, 1863.

In modern warfare, the army when on the march is confronted with the difficult problem of provisioning itself and it becomes the more embarrassing as it gets farther from its base, especially when invading the enemy's country. The line of transportation, either by rail or wagon-trains, is often raided by the enemy and frequently the supplies are destroyed or confiscated, thereby impeding the movements of the invading army.

In ancient wars it was quite different, as they were not handicapped by the transportation of supplies for the army. They depended on the country through which they marched for necessary provisions, having neither railroads nor wagon-trains. It is recorded of Xerxes, that to feed his immense army of soldiers during his campaigns, he sent his commissaries in advance to collect provisions from every part of the empire, then deposit them at suitable stations in his line of march. The principal cities through which he passed had to furnish a day's meal for the immense host, and for this purpose had made preparations many days beforehand. The cost of feeding such a multitude brought many citizens to the brink of ruin. The island of Thasis, alone, which had to undertake this enormous duty, on account of its position out of the mainland expended no less a sum than four hundred talents, or nearly one hundred thousand pounds in English money. A witty citizen of Abdera recommended his countrymen to return thanks to the gods because Xerxes was satisfied with one meal in a day.

Notwithstanding this providence of Xerxes, in a productive country his army suffered privations even to famine, when the supplies were exhausted, from the barrenness of the region through which he passed, especially in Boetia. When he reached the Hellespont his force was greatly diminished by famine and pestilence.

As to other ancient commanders, the technical works upon military science treating of army movements do not seem to deal with the subject from the gastronomic side, so that in reality it seems to be a question for original investigation. An examination of several representative biographies of ancient commanders does not show that the manner of provisioning their armies had received special treatment or consideration at the hands of the authors. The information, if therein contained, would seem to be parenthetical or incidental to other matter.

This is especially true as to Alexander the Great in feeding his army when on the march. On his return from a successful campaign in India he had reached the river Hydaspes. Here he built a fleet in which he sent part of his army down the river and the major part to march through the country, which was an immense, sandy desert, and in consequence all perished in the sand, being unable to procure food or water.

The work entitled "Caesar's Army" gives only meagre information as to how he fed his army on the march. In directing his soldiers to carry their provisions, it was not from choice, but a necessity, in that wheel conveyances of his country of that period, which were constructed for its excellent roads, were of too light a character for the rough country through which this great soldier conducted his campaigns.

This was especially true in Great Britain, and it was not until the end of the seventeenth century that a change in

these conditions was effected. After the construction of the "McAdams Roads" the pack-horse caravans were no longer a commercial necessity.

Gibbon says, "The ration of food for one day weighed about one and two-thirds pounds. On short expeditions each soldier must carry his own provisions, as many as seventeen days' rations, amounting to twenty-three pounds." The ration was usually in the form of coarse flour or unground grain which the soldier must crush for himself.

It is natural to infer from this data that when the contents of the haversack was consumed, it was replenished from the country through which Cæsar's army passed, thereby relieved of the encumberance and expense of wagon transportation.

Napoleon in his Russian campaign made levy for provisions on the citizens of the towns through which he passed, and also required them to give shelter to protect his army from the severe, cold weather.

It will be seen that the ancient commanders of armies could, on account of their not having a base of supplies to depend on for the feeding of their respective armies, utilize their effective strength in battle; and the commander was able to concentrate his thoughts on his aggressive movements, and in battle, strategy of evolution.

The discovery of gunpowder in the mediæval age thoroughly revolutionized the mode of warfare, as the primitive cross-bow and arrow, javelin, battle-ax and the battering-ram gave place to the musket and cannon; consequently wagon transportation became necessary for the heavy munitions of war.

In modern warfare the Commander-in-Chief in conducting an offensive campaign into the enemy's country has necessarily to leave a large percentage of his effective force in the rear to protect the line of communication, and the ratio of percen-

tage is augmented the further he gets from his base. This was especially true in the great and successful campaigns conducted by General Rosecrans in 1863. While the battle of Stone's River was in progress, General Rosecrans was obliged to leave his largest division at Gallatin, Tennessee, to guard. About fifteen per cent. of the army of the Cumberland was distributed along the line of communication from Louisville to Chattanooga, a distance of three hundred and eighteen miles, when the battle of Chickamauga was fought. Had this force, amounting to eleven thousand, been at the front and engaged in this battle, the center of Rosecrans' line would have remained intact.

The modern general commanding is greatly handicapped in his offensive movements by uneasiness of mind for the safely of the transportation of army supplies.

In this connection it is well to state, that soon after General Thomas assumed command of the Army of the Cumberland news came while at supper that Morgan had torn up a small portion of the railroad between Nashville and La Verne, and being considerably agitated by this intelligence, Thomas remarked to his staff, "Morgan gives me more trouble than Bragg." His colored cook remarked, "I knows John Morgan; I used to pull tow for him" (for Morgan had a tow factory in Lexington, Kentucky, before the war).

General Thomas responded, addressing his sable cook, "Don't you think that Morgan ought to now himself pull a little hemp?"

The poignant wit was quickly appreciated by the darky, who joined with the other hearers in a hearty laugh.

When it came to the knowledge of the citizens of the loyal states that General Sherman, on the eve of his march to the sea, had abandoned the railroad—the artery of supplies—

and had to depend on the country through which he would pass for food for his army, considerable apprehension was felt. Believing that the resources of that portion of the south was not adequate to the demand of so large an army, General Sherman's proposition of change of tactics was not at first received with favor by General Grant and General Thomas, as it would be a violation of the modern science of war. The former finally consented to the enterprise. That General Sherman fed his army of sixty thousand comfortably from the country bordering his march and did not deplete by far the horns of plenty, is an ample proof against the fallacious plea set up by the Richmond authorities, that on account of the poverty of the south, better and more sufficient food could not be furnished to the Federal soldiers, imprisoned at Andersonville, Georgia.

The capture of Chattanooga by the incomparable strategy of Rosecrans was of the greatest importance to the cause of the Union in that it was an assurance of the collapse of the so-called Confederacy at no distant date.

To wrest this stronghold from the iron grasp of Rosecrans, Lee sent to Bragg, Longstreet's Corps, the flower of the Southern army, but with this reinforcement, Bragg's effort proved unsuccessful after three days' hard fighting, for General Thomas, the "Rock of Chickamauga" was *there*, against whom the terrific wave of battle dashed in vain. On the night of the twenty-first of September, Thomas retired to Chattanooga behind hasty entrenchments constructed by Rosecrans the day before.

Like the vulture, who from his high perch looks below for the carcass on which to satisfy its rapacious appetite, Bragg with his army from the heights of Missionary Ridge and Lookout Mountain viewed the army of the Cumberland, hoping that from hunger the ranks would be thinned from day to day,

and that Rosecrans, to prevent a general calamity, would surrender the much-coveted position by retiring to his nearest base of supplies. But this dream was not to be realized, for Rosecrans was equal to the emergency. There was no vulture to lie in wait for his carcass. Nor was his army reduced to the simple diet of bark and worms, as was the emperor Guatimayin's hoard of barbarous warriors when effectually blockaded by Cortez, having been imprisoned in the Mexican capital.

Rosercans line of communication, direct from Bridgeport, being broken, Bragg believed, and not without reason, that no substitute of transportation could prove adequate to satisfy his partially pent-up adversary.

He knew, too, that the railroad from Nashville to Murfreesboro was another source of embarrassment to the Federal commander.

The bad state of the Nashville and Chattanooga railroad which was constructed, especially south of Murfreesboro, with light rail and stringer track, had come into our possession nearly worn out in supplying the rebel army while it lay at Murfreesboro; frequent interruptions by the wrecking of the trains and by obstructions placed upon the track by the rebels reduced the means of transportation, even to Bridgeport, below what was really necessary to feed the army at Chattanooga alone.

After Bragg's occupation of Lookout valley it became necessary for Rosecrans to substitute wagons for transportations of supplies from Bridgeport to his army. Though a herculean undertaking, it proved practicable, notwithstanding the natural obstacles, as long as the weather continued dry. To haul the rations by wagons from Bridgeport to Chattanooga (a distance of sixty miles, when only twenty-eight miles by rail, through Sequatchie Valley and over Waldon's Ridge)

occupied five days. For ten days the supply of provisions by this method was successful. The standing corn, ready for the shock or crib, found on several deserted plantations bordering the wagon route, afforded ample forage for the teams and sufficient opportunity for the trainsmen to vary their monotonous army rations.

However, the favorable auspices were brought to a termination by the fall rains which began on the first of October, and the roads became almost impassable. The rebel cavalry, crossing the Tennessee above Chattanooga, fell upon the trains entangled in the mud of the Sequatchie valley, and the rocks of the western ascent of Walden's ridge.

In consequence the rations of Rosecrans' army, 45,00 strong, was reduced to less than half, and the artillery and headquarter horses were from necessity sent to the rear to forage.

From exhaustion, caused by heavy hauling, a large number of mules fell dead in their tracks.

On the morning of October the first, I was ordered by General Rosecrans to proceed with my regiment, 21st Kentucky Volunteer Infantry, to Anderson's Gap, Tennessee, for protecting and managing trains. The same night I camped ten miles from the point of my destination. On the next morning about eight o'clock, when within two and one-half miles of the valley, word was received from Lieutenant Colonel J. C. Evans of my regiment (who had gone in advance, accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Boyd of Major General McCook's staff, to select camping ground and a suitable place for packing wagons) that a large cavalry force of the enemy (supposed to be a division under command of Wheeler) was advancing down the valley, and were in close proximity to Anderson's Gap, for the purpose of attacking the train.

My adjutant, by reason of my absence (I having been detained a short time in rear for the purpose of bringing up stragglers) moved the command at once at double quick, without waiting for me or sending me the information received, to the brow of the ridge, where Lieutenant Colonel Evans was in waiting.

The regiment then resumed the double quick to the relief of a company of the 60th Illinois Infantry, acting as train guard, which was then engaged with the enemy. When in and near the foot of the ridge and in sight of the rebels, the regiment halted and was formed in line of battle.

As my command descended farther down, and within a few yards of the bottom, it met the train guard (about fifty men in number) in some confusion, they having been driven back by Wheeler, and without a commander, they were ordered to join the regiment, which they promptly did.

The command had not proceeded far before firing became heavy on the left of the road, so much so that a company was then deployed as skirmishers in that direction to protect the flank. The men advanced slowly, driving the enemy (cheering all the while, inspired by the soul-stirring music of the band) some twenty-five or thirty minutes.

The left, being stronger than the right, was advanced some twenty yards down the hill. After being engaged fifteen or twenty minutes it was discovered the rebels were flanking the regiment on the right. Captain Sandidge (Company B) retarded their movements by moving his Company in that direction. Colonel Evans feared that Wheeler would flank the regiment owing to his superior numbers, in spite of our efforts to prevent it, and possibly get into the rear; by this means the regiment would be either captured or destroyed. The regiment accomplished the retreat with great difficulty.

The road being occupied by the enemy, the 21st Kentucky was compelled to ascend the mountain on the left of the road, over very stony ground and dense undergrowth and had deep ravines to encounter.

The enemy did not pursue any distance, and consequently the regiment was saved by retreating to the opposite side of the ridge (13 miles) where Companies K and G of my command were stationed.

By way of explanation why I was not with my command in the engagement, it is well for me to state that when I had descended the mountain more than half way I was told by several of my men who were unable to keep up in the rapid march, that the rebels were in the road between me and the regiment, and that it was impossible for me to proceed any farther (as they had been fired upon in their efforts to reach the command) without being captured or killed.

Believing that there were only a few in their way, I collected all the stragglers (eight in number) and deployed them in front of me for the purpose of reaching, if possible, my regiment by compelling the rebels to retire. I had not gone far, however, when I was met by one of my men (who had been in the fight), and from him I learned that the regiment had fallen back.

When I received the information that my command was on the retreat, I dispatched word to Colonel Evans (supposing him to be not far off) that there were 75 or 100 wagons in the road upon the side of the mountain that possibly could be saved, and to bring the regiment to that point without delay.

I waited near the wagons some minutes, hoping to hear from him, and did not retire till I heard that the rebels were advancing and were not far from me. Not being able to find any regiment, I rode back, hoping to meet the two companies under command of Major J. E. Hoskins, which I had ordered

to the support of the other companies engaged and caused them to return to protect the trains which were miles in advance loaded with supplies for the army. I met the companies within six miles of Anderson's Gap and turned them back. But we were not pursued and the trains reached their destination in safety.

Even had we been sufficiently strong to have driven the enemy, we reached the scene of destruction too late to have saved the wagons at the foot of the Ridge, for the trains were then in possession of the rebels, and most of the wagons destroyed. In consequence of the exposure to the rain on the march the day before, my guns were in very bad condition and many of them unserviceable, but notwithstanding, those which could be used were fired with telling effect.

I am unable to state the loss of the enemy, but from information derived from citizens and from my men who were captured and afterwards made their escape, their loss must have been heavy; thirty are represented killed and a larger number wounded.

Among the number killed was a colonel and a captain, Captain Jack Jones of Louisville, of the 1st Kentucky rebel regiment, who is buried at the church near Anderson's Gap; his name and rank are in legible characters on head-board.

Two majors were severely wounded. We captured five prisoners; three being unable to keep up were dropped on the retreat.

My loss was comparatively small—only three killed, three wounded and thirty-eight enlisted men and non-commissioned officers missing, my sergeant-major among the number; one captain and two lieutenants missing reported the day after to me. I omitted to mention in its proper connection that I had only 200 guns in the action, only seven companies represented,

two being detached on special duty and a large detail with supplying trains. The enemy had two brigades, their force estimated at 5,000.

I know of no reason why Wheeler did not pursue us, unless deterred by the boldness of my men, believing it the advance of a large force and that our falling back of the regiment was simply a feint to get them into trouble. Both officers and men acted with coolness and bravery without exeception until overpowered by overwhelming numbers.

The number of wagons containing rations destroyed amounted to about 300, and 1,800 mules were killed or captured. On the estimate of six mules to a wagon, General Joseph Wheeler in his report to General Bragg stated "That the number of wagons was variously estimated at from 800 to 1,500."

The quartermaster in charge of the train, as well as other employees, stated that there were 800 mule wagons, besides a great number of sutler wagons. After selecting such mules and wagons as he needed, Wheeler then destroyed the train by burning the wagons and sabering the mules.

The martial band, before mentioned, the strains of which inspired my boys in the determined purpose in their movement against the enemy, belonged to an Illinois regiment and were on their return from a twenty days' furlough to Chattanooga.

Lieutenant Colonel Evans met the members of the band as they were progressing up the ridge and not far from its base. He commanded them to halt, and addressing the drum major, requested him to have the band play some National airs, which he promptly refused to do. Thereupon, the Colonel in an imperative tone of voice commanded him to strike up and "darn quick," at the same time ordering a soldier who was nearby to shoot him dead if he did not obey. That the com-

mand was immediately obeyed goes without saying and he then, without delay, directed his band to play the airs requested. This impromptu strategy, in a measure, as before intimated, caused the rebels to promptly retire.

A few days after the engagement with Wheeler the camp was moved on to and near the top of the ridge for the purpose of corduroying the road, which was also in a bad condition owing to the heavy and frequent rains. The camp was a comparatively safe one as the rebel cavalry confined their operations to the valley. Many of my command not having Johnnie rebs to hunt, directed their attentions to deer and wild turkeys, which would appear daily not very remote from the camp. In consequence they were able to supplement the hard tack, sow belly, beans and coffee, by venison and turkey, a bill of fare which was fit to set before a king, But whenever they sat down to the meal the thought of the suffering of their comrades at Chattanooga because of short rations, made the venison less savory.

I finally had to issue order against the practice, as it had become excessive; in that it was an expenditure of Uncle Sam's ammunition. The constant passing of trains and officers going to and from the army gave interest to the camp, which otherwise would have been monotonous on the dreary mountain top.

Frequent were the visitors to the camp, some from motives of friendship, and others for convenience would make it a station by stopping over night on their journey. One afternoon, near nightfall, the regiment was honored by a visit from Generals Rosecrans and Garfield, who were traveling to Nashville after their connection with the Army of the Cumberland had been severed. When they rode up to my headquarters, I requested them to dismount and spend the night with me,

which invitation was readily accepted. I assigned them to my quarters, and my chum, Lieutenant Evans, and I sought beds elsewhere. Unfortunately for the distinguished guests a heavy rain came up during the night, greatly interfering with the comfort of the travelers, for in the morning when I went to inquire how they had spent the night, I found General Garfield seated on the side of the rustic bed emptying the water out of his boot, and his comrade arranging his coat before the fire to dry. I felt disposed to apologize, but I had done the best I could for their comfort. This brought vividly to General Garfield's mind my application, made only a few days before, for a tent, which had been refused me. With an appreciative twinkle in his eye, he called for the regimental quartermaster, and told him to make out a requisition for a tent for me. This was promptly done and presented to General Garfield, who made the following endorsement on the margin: "I most earnestly recommend that a tent be issued to Colonel Price, for I know from my own experience that no officer in the army needs a new one more than he does." It is needless to say that the recommendation was recognized favorably, and I got what I had so long needed and desired. General Garfield, in conversation afterwards with me, referred to this circumstance as a smart piece of strategy on my part to obtain a new tent. The saddle of venison on which the guests were regaled is so intimately associated with the remembrance of their agreeable visit, that the latter cannot be mentioned without bringing to mind the secret history of the steak. Soon after the visitors had departed, the Captain of Company C brought to me one of his men (a native of the Emerald Isle) with the complaint that he had the day before violated a solemn edict promulgated through the adjutant. He wanted to know the penalty for the commission of the offence. The soldier had

killed a deer with the government ammunition. As the offender could not prefer the common plea of self-defence usual in the case of a sheep or a hog, he pleaded guilty to the charge. But when the stern judge had passed sentence and assigned him to three hours' hard labor, Pat, feeling the injustice of the decision, spoke up and said: "If it plaze yer Honor, I'd like to know which is worse, to accept stolen goods or to stale them?" It is needless to say that I at once discharged the prisoner. As Captain Sherrard had never before thought it necessary to refer his men to me to discipline, I always charged him with having put up "a job" in order to fortify for dereliction of duty in letting such offenders go unpunished. He was himself a wilful *particeps criminis*.

General Rosecrans was relieved of the command on the nineteenth of October. That day he rode to Browns' Ferry with General W. F. Smith, his chief engineer, and General J. J. Reynolds, his chief of staff, making a general examination of the river, with respect to selecting a point below Lookout mountain for throwing the bridges, and a special examination of Brown's Ferry, where the bridge was finally thrown. Soon after General Grant assumed command of the armies, he carried out General Rosecrans' plan of effecting a landing of troops on the south side of the river at Brown's Ferry by means of a pontoon bridge, which was constructed with the boats which noiselessly floated down the river at 3 o'clock A. M. in close proximity to the rebel pickets stationed for seven miles on the south side of the river. The flotilla consisted of 52 boats occupied by 1,500 men, including the crew, all under command of General Hazen. Of this strategy there is nothing in ancient history that has a parallel to its ingenuity, except that when Cyrus made a successful assault on Babylon under the rule of Belshazzer. This was made on a day when the ruler, relying

upon the height and strength of the walls, had given himself up to the riot and debauchery of a grand public festival.

Cyrus had previously caused a canal which ran west of the city and carried off the superfluous water of the Euphrates into the Lake Micocris, to be cleared out, in order to turn the river into it, which by this means was rendered so shallow that his soldiers were able to penetrate along its bed into the city. The occupation of Lookout valley proved a key to the situation, as it resulted in the capture of Lookout mountain which therefore enabled Hooker to proceed down the east side of the mountain and threaten Bragg's rear. The movements of Hooker on his left and Sherman on his right and the successful charge of the Army of the Cumberland on Bragg's center, caused the enemy to retire.

The natural inquiry of the future historian, in my opinion, will be why Rosecrans was not permitted by the authorities at Washington to carry out his strategy, for with the reinforcements asked for he could have destroyed Bragg or compelled him to descend from his lofty perch and to have sought a more southernly climate.

In consequence the direct line of communication would have been restored several weeks sooner.

His body rests yonder in the National bivouac of the dead, and where also lie the ashes of Sheridan, Brannan, Baird, and Boynton who fought under him.

The patriotic visitor to the Arlington Cemetery in the future, if not now, will be pointed with the finger of pride to Rosecrans grave, accompanied with the words: "There lies all that is mortal of the hero of Rich mountain, Corinth, Stone's River, and Chattanooga. Peace be to his ashes."

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